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ABSTRACT

This guide offers suggestions to parents and mentors of high school students with disabilities for providing these students with direction in their exploration of interests, careers, and college planning. Discussion of some employment issues notes the increasing numbers of postsecondary students with disabilities, remaining barriers to employment, the special challenges faced by students with disabilities, and the importance of early career planning and preparation. The advantages for students of participating in work-based learning opportunities are listed and followed with descriptions of typical activities such as information interviews with people in fields of interest, job shadowing, internships, service learning, cooperative education, and independent study. Twelve specific suggestions are then offered for ways to provide support to students. A resource list includes 17 Web sites, a videotape, and information about the University of Washington's DO-IT Project. (DB)

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Learn and Earn: Supporting Teens
Supporting High School Students in Preparing for Careers

University of Washington

2001

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Learn and Earn: Supporting Teens

DO-IT

Supporting high school students in preparing for careers

As adolescents go through high school, they learn to take on more initiative, responsibility and independence. Parents and adults know that, in spite of their evolving maturity, many teenagers need support and encouragement as they begin take the initiative, act responsibly and grow in their independence.

Parents and mentors of youth with disabilities have unique opportunities to promote their successful transition to postsecondary education, employment and full participation in society. Families and mentors need to step in and assist in the transition process by providing adolescents direction in their exploration of interests, guidance in career and college planning, and encouragement and support as they pursue their dreams.

Employment Issues

The number of students with disabilities entering and completing postsecondary education has increased dramatically in the last decade, yet people with disabilities are still underrepresented in the employment arena. A 1998 poll commissioned by the National Organization on Disability shows that only thirty-two percent of those with disabilities of working age are employed full- or part-time as compared to eighty-one percent of those without disabilities. Of the group of unemployed people with disabilities, over sixty-five percent reported they would like to be employed.

Barriers to employment include lack of adequate support systems; little access to successful role models; lack of access to technology that can increase independence and productivity; and, most significantly, low expectations on the part of people with whom they interact.

High school students may think they have plenty of time to decide on their career paths and acquire the skills they will need to market themselves successfully. They may also believe that completing a college or job training program will guarantee them a job. This is not true in every situation.

As future employees, students with disabilities face unique challenges. Like other students, they need to find a way to meet the specific qualifications of the desired job. They also need to demonstrate transferable skills – in other words, skills acquired through education and previous work experiences that can transfer to a new employment situation. Transferable skills include communication, trouble-shooting, decision-making, leadership, and problem-solving. These are some of the skills that cross jobs, career, and industries. It's never too early to get off to a running start.

Students with disabilities need to start exploring their career interests and developing their job skills now! Career planning and preparation should begin upon entering high school and occur throughout postsecondary studies. Remind them that they do not need to settle on one area to pursue right away, and can change directions. But, they need to prepare for the long run – for their lifelong career or multiple careers. In today's competitive job market it is essential that students possess skills and relevant job experience that will set them apart from everyone else. One way a student can start narrowing career interests and developing job skills is through work-based learning experiences.

Why Should Students with Disabilities Participate in Work-based Learning?

Through the interaction of study and work experience, students can enhance their academic knowledge, personal development, and professional preparation.

Specifically, work-based learning opportunities can help a student:

- clarify academic and career interests;
- fund education expenses;
- gain academic credit;
- apply practical theories from classroom work and develop human relations skills through interaction with co-workers;
- gain exposure to specialized facilities not available on campus;
- develop job-search skills, resumes and cover letters;
- identify career assistance programs; and
- develop contacts for employment after graduation

For students with disabilities, work-based learning offers additional benefits. Participating in a work experience can give them a chance to determine if they can perform the essential functions of a particular job with or without a reasonable accommodation. It also gives them a chance to practice disclosing their disability and requesting accommodations from an employer. In addition, they can test which accommodations work best for them. These experiences help students with disabilities develop the confidence and self-advocacy skills needed for success in higher education and challenging careers.

Below are descriptions of typical activities and services offered at many high schools:

Informational Interview
Informational interviews help students gain personal insight into specific careers from people in the field. They meet with people working in their areas of interest to ask questions about occupations, job duties, education requirements, qualifications, and companies.

Job Shadowing
Job shadowing provides students with a realistic view of one or more occupations. Students visit a business to observe the everyday functions of their occupational area of interest. Experiences may vary in time from one hour to a full day.

Internship
An internship is a time-limited, intensive learning experience outside the traditional classroom. Students work in a supervised learning situation, paid or non-paid, with an employer doing planned learning activities. Interns learn about occupational fields and specific job tasks, while developing work-readiness.

Service Learning
In service learning experiences students provide community service in non-paid, volunteer positions. These programs increase the relevancy of academic learning by giving students opportunities to apply knowledge and skills while making meaningful contributions. Students with service learning requirements should pursue opportunities related to their career interests.

Cooperative Education
Cooperative Education programs work with students, school staff, and employers to help students clarify career and academic goals, and expand classroom study by participating in paid work experiences. Students work in trainee positions in their fields of interest and may also earn academic credit.

Independent Study
Some academic programs allow independent studies as an optional program component. Students work one-on-one with individual teachers to develop projects for credit. Projects can range from research papers to work experience within their field of interest.

Providing Support

Parents, family members, and mentors can help young people become self-determined and access career preparation resources. They can empower them and reinforce their plans for success. Here are some ways to provide support:

- Help students identify their vocational strengths and interests – look at hobbies, pastimes, etc.
- Educate yourself about adaptive technology, accommodations, and employment issues.
- Talk to students about self-advocacy, determining appropriate accommodations, and disclosing their disabilities.
- Encourage students to develop personal networks of family members, friends and community contacts to open up opportunities for work-based learning.
- Parents and guardians should involve themselves in the Individual Education Plans (IEP) of their children and make sure employment-preparation activities are included.
- Learn about available adult services and start preparing students for the transition to independent adulthood.
- Assist students in accessing local support networks and disability services organizations, such as the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation, which may be able to provide career preparation, job placement, and referrals to community programs.
- Encourage students to visit the counseling/advising office or career center at their high schools. They may provide a variety of career preparation and job search services. Students can develop career plans and job search skills through individual counseling and workshops.
- Investigate School-to-Work programs, such as Tech Prep and High School/High Tech. Tech Prep education is a planned sequence of study in a technical field beginning early in high school. Some Tech Prep courses may be articulated with coursework at local community colleges.
- Contact your State Governor's Committee on Employment of with Disabilities for information about High School/High Tech, a partnership that combines site tours, job shadowing, internships, and mentoring to encourage students with disabilities to pursue careers in the technology industry.
- Assist students in developing mentoring relationships through family and employment contacts or through disability agencies.
- If necessary, provide transportation support to allow students to participate in work-based learning experiences.

Helping Students Get Started?

The CAREERS acronym developed by DO-IT can be used as a roadmap to help guide students through this process.

C is for Careers. Have students think about their interests. Encourage them to be imaginative, then narrow it down.

A is for Academics. Assist students in determining which academic programs best suit their career goals.

R is for Research. Support research of careers that spark their interests, maximize strengths, and minimize weaknesses.

EE is for Experiential Education. Support practice of job search skills. Assist in seeking and participating in opportunities.

RS is for Relevant Skills. Encourage students learn practical "real world" skills through on-the-job experience.

Resources

The World Wide Web houses a wide variety of information, including information about jobs,

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career preparation, and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA).

- DO-IT CAREERS
  http://www.washington.edu/doit/Careers/
- Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and Disability Information
  http://www.usdoj.gov/crt/ada/adahom1.htm
- Career Magazine
  http://www.careermag.com/
- Career Planning Process
  http://www.bgsu.edu/offices/student_affairs/career/process/
- Facts about Transition from School to Work and Community Life
  http://thearc.org/faqs/qa-idea-transition.html
- High School / High Tech
  http://www.dol.gov/odep/programs/high.htm
- Job Accommodation Network
  http://janweb.icdi.wvu.edu/
- Mapping Your Future
  http://mapping-your-future.org/
- Marriott Foundation
  http://www.marriottfoundation.org/
- National Transition Alliance for Youth with Disabilities
  http://www.dssc.org/nta/textonly/index_t.htm
- One-Stop Career Center
  http://www.wa.gov/esd/1stop/
- Online Career Center
  http://www.occ.com/
- Parents and the STW Transition of Special Needs Youth
  http://www.kidsource.com/kidsource/content4/special.needs.trans.html
- School-to-Work Fact Sheets
  http://www.stw.ed.gov/factsht/facttoc.htm
- Social Security Disability Programs
  http://www.ssa.gov/disability/
- State and Local School-to-Work Links
  http://www.stw.ed.gov/wwwsites.htm
- State Vocational Rehabilitation Agencies
  http://www.pueblo.gsa.gov/crhvocational.htm

Videotape

A 13-minute videotape, *Learn and Earn: Supporting Teens*, may be ordered by sending a check for $25.00 to DO-IT.

About DO-IT

The University of Washington helps individuals with disabilities transition to college and careers through project DO-IT (Disabilities, Opportunities, Internetworking, and Technology). Primary funding for the DO-IT project is provided by the National Science Foundation and the State of Washington. Additional funding has been provided by the US Department of Education, NEC Foundation of America, The Telecommunications Funding Partnership, and US West Communications. The University of Washington also contributes substantial resources to this project. For more information, or do be added to the DO- IT mailing list, contact:

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Grants and gifts fund DO-IT publications, videotapes, and programs to support the academic and career success of people with disabilities. Contribute today by sending a check to DO-IT, Box 355670, University of Washington, Seattle, WA 98195-5670.

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